

# A DECADE OF LEADERSHIP

## Dean Hildebrand Retires from Director's Post

By Ron Wilson

It's the evening before the new North Dakota Game and Fish Department director will be named and Dean Hildebrand's office light continues to burn. It's been weeks since he announced his retirement, but signs of cracking back, settling into an easy glide are still missing.

As colleagues power-down computers and file out of Department headquarters into the too-early darkness of November, Hildebrand stays at it, thoughts busied with paperwork, e-mails, letters, unfinished business.

The after-hours scene is fitting.

"Dean worked so hard to do the very best that he could," said Keith Trego, executive director of North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, who also served as deputy director with Hildebrand from 1996-98, "You've got to give him a lot of credit as he has sacrificed a lot for the sportsmen of the state. Dean represented them extremely well, putting their needs first and foremost. He gave them everything he had."

### Brief Sketch

**Hometown** – Kulm, North Dakota. Grew up in the grocery, farming and cattle business.

**Education** – Bachelor of Science degree in biology from Valley City State University, and a Master of Science degree in fisheries biology from the University of North Dakota.

**Military** – Col. Dean Hildebrand served 40 years in the North Dakota National Guard.

**Other** – Served as a teacher, college administrator and owner and operator of a marina on Devils Lake.

**Lawmaker** – Served as a state legislator from 1971-75.

**Game and Fish** – Appointed as Game and Fish Department director in 1996.

**Family** – Married to Joey Markel of Penn, North Dakota. They have three children and six grandchildren.

Hildebrand served as Department director for nearly 10 years, more than double the average tenure of people in similar positions around the country. He was appointed to the position in April 1996 by Gov. Ed Schafer and reappointed in July 2001 by Gov. John Hoeven. His replacement is Terry Steinwand, a longtime fisheries administrator who has worked for Game and Fish since 1982.

"I would like to thank retiring Director Dean Hildebrand, who has left a living legacy for generations to come in the form of North Dakota's great outdoors," Hoeven said.

### Staff Supporter

If you've ever attended a gathering with Hildebrand – and you likely have as he's known as a tireless traveler and meeting-goer – you've heard him go on and on about his staff. His comments are flattering to the point that if you don't know him well enough, they may come off as a little overdone. Nonetheless, his praise is genuine.

"The single thing I'm most proud of is the staff we have at the Game and Fish Department," he said. "I've hired 79 employees in the almost 10 years here, and I want to tell you that we have some extremely talented people on board. When I came here there was a solid foundation to build upon, and we've created some new positions that allowed us to really come into the 21st century."

Hildebrand describes the working environment at Game and Fish as symbiotic – different divisions of the Department living together to their mutual advantage. "It's an open atmosphere where we can exchange ideas freely and expand our level of awareness ... it's a formula for success," he said. "I get a lot of credit for some of our successes, but I want to be the first person to say that the credit goes to the people who work here."

### Better Communication

Hindsight, as they say, is 20-20. And yes, if Hildebrand had to do it all over again, he'd

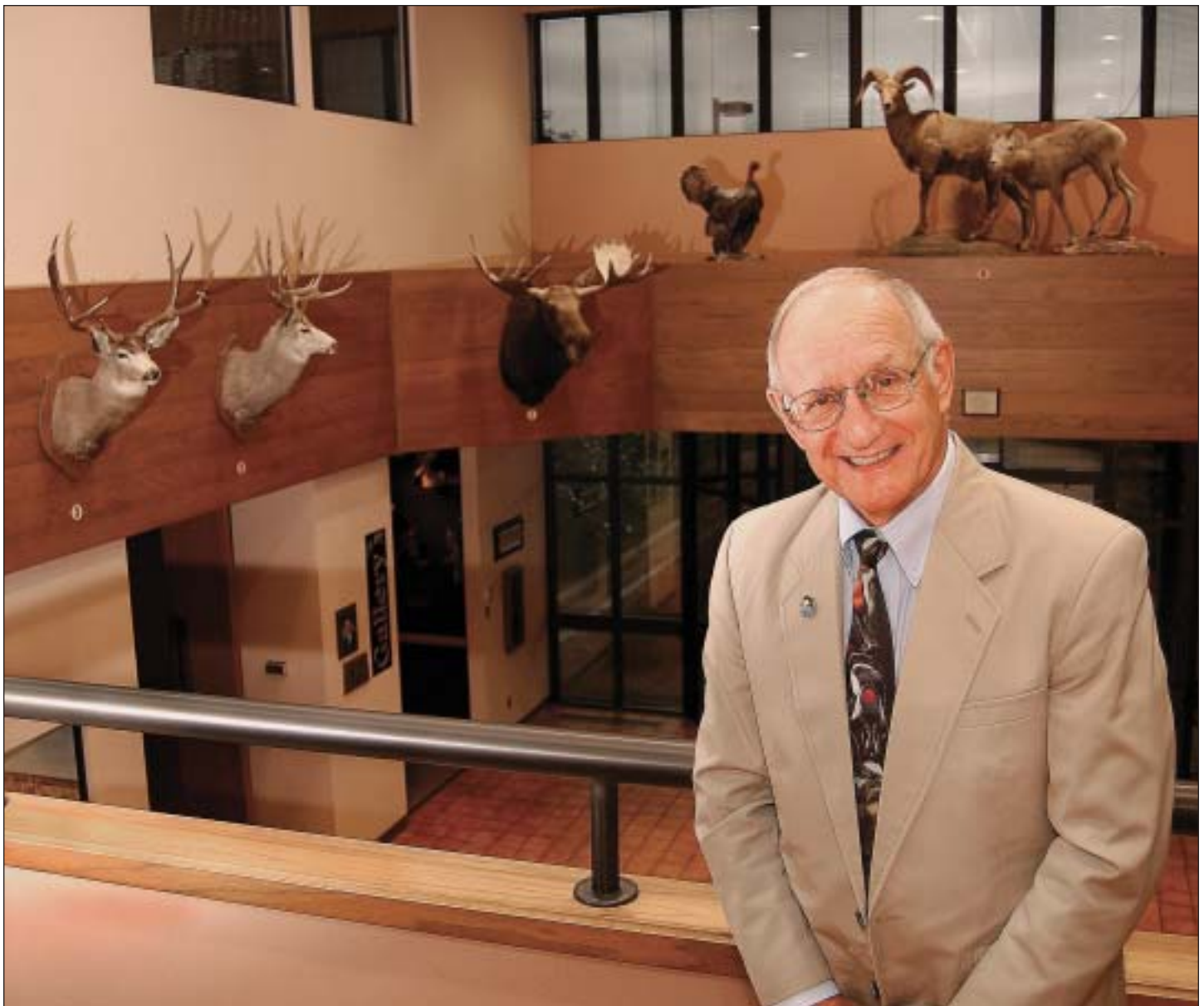
adjust accordingly. "I think we ran into a situation early on with the resident and nonresident waterfowl hunter issue," he said. "I think the situation initially got too deep-seated ... I should have opened up the lines of communication sooner."

In the early part of this decade, the increased number of hunters coming to North Dakota to hunt ducks became a pressing issue. For many years, the number of nonresident waterfowl hunters was under 10,000, but in time jumped to about 30,000. With this tripling in hunter numbers also came more guides and outfitters. Quality hunting spots became harder to find.

"There were those who were definitely opposed to having any additional nonresidents coming into the state, and some, if they had their druthers, would not have allowed any nonresidents to hunt in North Dakota," Hildebrand said. "But that's not a realistic approach. I was worried about our relationship with nonresidents because many of them were once residents, own land here, or have relatives in North Dakota. For us not to have a good relationship with them is a real concern for me."

To help promote better communication – to anyone willing to listen, be it resident or nonresident – four outreach biologists were hired and placed in Bismarck, Fargo, Grand Forks and Minot. "My reaction was to have our outreach guys available to inform people on the things that we do, on things we are keenly aware of in the Department, but many times take for granted because they are everyday occurrences. Looking back, I would have brought our outreach biologists on sooner and made a greater effort to communicate with the public than I did."

While dealing with visiting hunters is important, Hildebrand said his commitment was always to those at home. "I have to tell you right up front that my first obligation, I feel, is to our resident hunters and anglers of North Dakota," he said. "Many of these people are the Department's hunter education



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*Dean Hildebrand served nearly 10 years as director of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.*

instructors, volunteers who teach birding, fishing or how to simply enjoy the great outdoors. I can't afford to alienate anyone in the state of North Dakota if I can possibly avoid it."

Game and Fish Department personnel have long understood the importance of communicating with the public. But Hildebrand raised the bar in this arena, said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. "He was tireless and enthusiastic about public speaking appearances," Kreil said. "Dean was a strong promoter of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, which he calls an umbilical to the public in terms of information, and he paved the way for the creation of our outreach biologists ..."

His commitment to North Dakotans and the state's natural resources will be remembered. "Dean's enthusiasm for the natural

resources of North Dakota is apparent from the time you meet him," said Dan Hare, regional wildlife biologist for Pheasants Forever. "His interest in improving the habitat conditions across the state has allowed the Department to develop innovative programs to deliver to landowners. Department staff have created and implemented a variety of programs that improve habitat for fish and wildlife, as well as provide opportunities for sportsmen at the same time."

### **Challenges Remain**

Now that Hildebrand has finally turned off his office light, the beat at the Game and Fish Department goes on, and challenges remain.

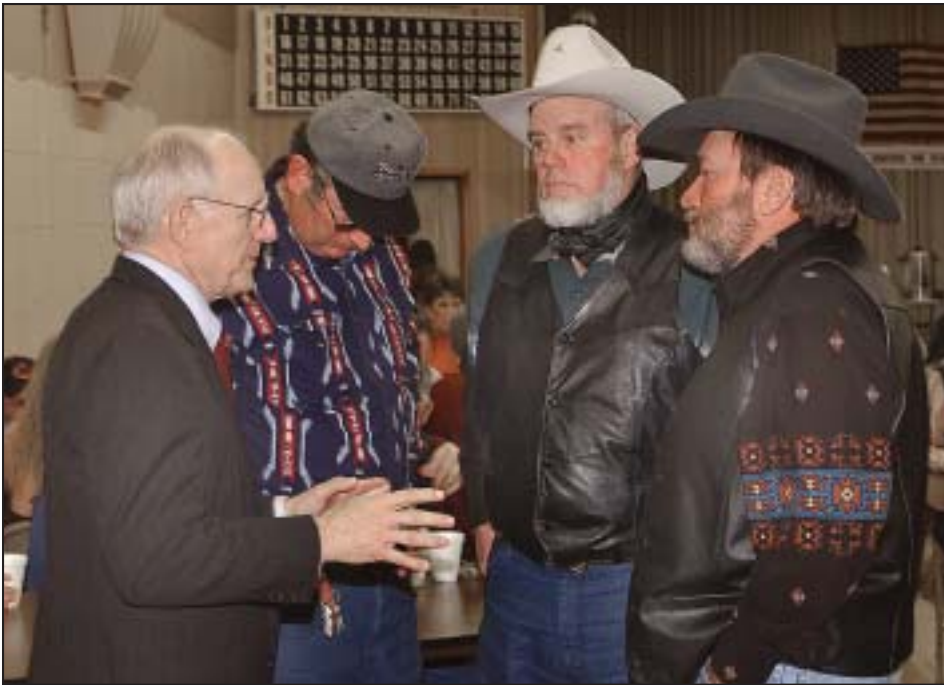
The Department's top challenge in coming years, Hildebrand said, is safeguarding quality habitat for wildlife on land and in water.

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"First of all, we have to have habitat and it's going to be a test to maintain good habitat," he said. "What really concerns me is the possible loss of our Conservation Reserve Program base. In the next couple of years we could see a reduction from 3.4 million acres of CRP to 1.7 million acres. That's going to have a profound impact on the wildlife on our landscape. Without the habitat, we won't have the populations of wild game that we have now."

If half of the state's CRP is lost, Hildebrand worries about whether an alternative source of cover can be put in its place. "Can we find something to put on the landscape that is still going to provide good habitat?" he said.

*As the leader of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, Dean Hildebrand was a tireless meeting-goer during his tenure.*



CRAIG BIHRLE

The fight, however – from wildlife managers, hunters, anglers, birders and landowners – will be to retain the state's CRP acres.

Finding a way to save and restore what remains of North Dakota's wetlands is another challenge the Game and Fish Department will face, Hildebrand said. "Here in North Dakota we have about 50 percent of our wetlands left, and they are always going to be under threat," he said. "People want to drain them, farm them, but we have to work diligently to keep them."

The rapid development of high-tech hunting and fishing equipment that, depending on your views, takes some of the skill out of harvesting fish and game, also concerns Hildebrand. "The degree of sophistication in some of the hunting and fishing equipment out there is developing so rapidly," he said. "We must remember that whatever the mind of man visualizes, modern science can bring into being. Science allows us to overrun the ethics in hunting and fishing and that should concern us."

### Retirement

The transition from an always-on-the-go schedule to retirement is going to be interesting. Hildebrand is used to being busy, working hard, as he says, on constructive projects where a sense of accomplishment and pride can be felt at the end. He's had a number of offers for his post-director life, but nothing he prefers to talk about now. You get the feeling, however, that whatever he does will have something to do with preserving what wildness we do have remaining on the Northern Plains.

In the meantime: "I'm going to take some time to do some hunting and fishing," said Hildebrand. "I have a son who was called to active duty for two years and he has two kids. Spending time outdoors with my grandkids is going to be a top priority." He also plans to work on his fly-casting skills, tie some flies, do more shooting, dust off his archery equipment . . .

"There certainly won't be a lack of things to do," Hildebrand said. "I owe my church some more service, and I want to get involved in some activities where I can pay back this great state for what it has done for me."

**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

### Steinwand Appointed

Gov. John Hoeven appointed Terry Steinwand as director of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department effective January 1.

Steinwand has been with the Department for 22 years. He started in 1982 as a fisheries biologist, and in 1989 he was named the Department's fisheries division chief.

"Terry brings two decades of experience to the director's position, as well as the respect of colleagues and the public," Hoeven said. "Not only has he helped to build world-class fisheries in North Dakota, but he has also helped us to meet challenges like drought on the Missouri River and completion of an outlet from Devils Lake. He'll bring that same great experience and love of North Dakota's fish and game to his job as director."

### Roast Director

The North Dakota Wildlife Federation is hosting a roast for retired State Game and Fish Department Director Dean Hildebrand, January 20 at the Doublewood Inn in Bismarck.

The event's social will begin at 5:30 p.m., followed by dinner at 6:30 and the roast at 7. Tickets are \$30 for singles and \$50 for couples. Call 888-827-2557 to reserve tickets.